

Secretary Pompeo's Four-Country Trip an Opportunity to Build on Renewed U.S. Ties to Central Europe

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Secretary Pompeo's visit to Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovenia is a high-profile opportunity for the U.S. to reaffirm its commitment to Europe.

Key areas for cooperation are energy security, maintaining the Balkans' Western trajectory, and unleashing the economic potential of the Three Seas Initiative.

The visit should advance U.S. policies that push back against Russian aggression and address rising Chinese influence in Europe.

On August 11, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo kicked off a trip to Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovenia in Central Europe. Secretary Pompeo's visit comes on the heels of the Administration's decision to withdraw 6,400 troops from Europe, and end heel-to-toe Marine rotations to Norway. It is therefore a high-profile opportunity for the U.S. to reaffirm its commitment to Europe, while building on the renewed ties the Administration has forged with Central Europe, and to advance U.S. interests on key policy issues including rising Chinese influence, energy security, Russian aggression, keeping the Balkans on a Western trajectory, and unleashing the potential of the Three Seas Initiative for future economic growth.

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U.S. Will Remain Pivotaly Engaged in European Security

Since 2017, the Trump Administration has made significant strides in bolstering collective defense in Europe. Unfortunately, the recently announced decision to withdraw 6,400 troops from Europe and end the rotations of 700 Marines to Norway will not benefit transatlantic security. While the U.S. may introduce new rotations to the Baltic and Black Sea regions, and the new agreement with Poland to rotate an additional 1,000 U.S. forces to the country was recently signed,¹ it would be far preferable for the U.S. to establish a permanent presence in Poland rather than continuing to rely on rotational forces. Furthermore, this presence should not be drawn from U.S. forces in Germany, but come as an additional and complementary initiative to bolster U.S. contributions to collective defense in Europe.

In light of recent announcements, some in Europe may be wary about the U.S. retrenching and moving away from Europe. On his trip, Secretary Pompeo must first and foremost reiterate America's enduring commitment to European security. It is critical that the Secretary of State reaffirm that U.S. force posture changes do not mean a lessening of U.S. interest in Europe's security.

Pushing Back Against Pipelines that Undermine Security in Europe

The Nord Stream II (NSII) natural gas pipeline would connect Germany with Russia—which is neither economically necessary nor geopolitically prudent. What it *would* do, is to greatly increase European dependence on Russian gas, magnify Russia's ability to use its European energy dominance as a political trump card, and specifically undermine U.S. allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Russia currently supplies around 40 percent of Europe's natural gas. The ability to transit more gas via Baltic Sea pipelines (Nord Stream I and, if completed, NSII) at the expense of overland routes through Belarus and Ukraine, would make Europe far more vulnerable to Russia's energy blackmail, while at the same time, allowing Russia to stifle financial flows to nations in Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine, which currently collect significant transit fees.² NSII would also allow Russia to stifle competition from liquefied natural gas (LNG), which has made strides in the European market in recent years.

Now is a critical moment: The pipeline has fewer than 100 miles remaining before completion, and current U.S. sanctions are helping to arrest progress. Some countries on the Secretary's itinerary, such as Austria, strongly support NSII, while others, such as Poland, are firmly opposed. For the U.S., keeping NSII from being completed must remain a priority. The pipeline, which is opposed by most European nations, is a political project that greatly undermines collective defense in Europe. Secretary Pompeo should clearly detail that U.S. policy is not about hurting allies or carving out room for the U.S. LNG market, but about confronting the security challenges inherent in an active pipeline.

Similarly, in January 2020, Russia and Turkey officially launched the Turkish Stream project, which will bring Russian gas to Turkey via a pipeline under the Black Sea. Russia plans to construct additional pipelines running northward into Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary. The Turkish Stream pipeline and planned lines feeding gas into the rest of Europe serve multiple purposes. As a new entry point for Russian gas into Europe, the pipelines will strengthen Moscow's grip on the continent's energy needs, thus increasing its future geopolitical leverage. Furthermore, Turkish Stream would allow Russia to bypass overland pipelines and deprive nations, such as Romania and Ukraine, of transit fees.

Keep Momentum Strong for the Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) will allow the U.S. to build strengthened transatlantic business, energy, and geopolitical ties to Central and Eastern Europe, while also counterbalancing Chinese and Russian efforts to forge regional inroads. This year was already a pivotal moment for the 3SI—with tangible outcomes starting to magnify, or with the initiative fading away as a missed opportunity due to a lack of political will (and that was before the COVID-19 outbreak). The pandemic has ravaged transatlantic economies and forced the postponement of the 2020 3SI summit from June to October.

The Trump Administration has been rightly supportive of the 3SI, offering both political and economic backing for the project. Secretary Pompeo should continue to advance an agenda that enhances cooperation among the nations of the 3SI, offering top-level U.S. political support to the initiative, and when in the national interest to do so, work with countries of the 3SI to fund projects jointly.

Currently, five nations—Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Romania—have contributed to the Three Seas Investment Fund, with the U.S. pledging \$1 billion in matching funds.³ The pandemic-created economic downturn is likely to make attaining additional pledges more difficult. However, the potential of increased north-south interconnections in the region promises a significant commercial and political return that will help to jump-start recovery by tapping the unrealized potential of Europe’s most dynamic economic region.

Building a United Front Against Chinese Propaganda and Influence

While Chinese investment in Eastern Europe remains relatively small, accounting for only 2.6 percent of Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe as a whole in 2019,⁴ China has targeted the region for strategic investment, seeking diplomatic and political leverage over profit. China also continues efforts to influence the political debate within the region, for instance, through Confucius Institutes (which also exist in the United States), the propaganda farms masquerading as benign cultural organizations at colleges and universities. Among the countries that Secretary Pompeo will visit, six Confucius Institutes currently operate in Poland, two in the Czech Republic, and one in Slovenia.⁵

The tide, however, may be turning in part due to Chinese heavy-handedness. This is especially evident in the Czech Republic, where a sister-cities agreement signed by Prague with Taipei recently set off a furious reaction in Beijing.⁶ Czech public opinion has soured on China, with only 10 percent of Czechs now believing that China has a positive influence on the global political situation.⁷

Another critical area of focus on Secretary Pompeo’s trip will be China’s role in Europe’s fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks. The recent reversal of the United Kingdom decision to allow Huawei a 35 percent share of the nation’s 5G infrastructure, and French moves to phase China out of its telecommunications networks, has helped to advance Washington’s argument that 5G is first and foremost a security decision rather than an economic one.

A Focus on the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is a region of Europe with unfinished business. Ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, along with historical grievances,

retain the potential to set off renewed hostilities and violence. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the destabilizing influence of Russia, rising Chinese interest and investment in the region, pockets of Islamist extremism, high unemployment, and lack of economic opportunity threaten to ensnare the Balkans in a permanent purgatorial geopolitical quicksand.

The Trump Administration has rightly placed an emphasis on the region, particularly normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The Western Balkans remain critically important for European security, and for nations in Central Europe, a potential flashpoint in their own backyard. Secretary Pompeo would be wise to maintain a focus on Balkan issues during his trip overseas.

Key Priorities for Secretary Pompeo's Trip

Secretary Pompeo's trip comes at an important time in transatlantic relations. To make the most of his time overseas, the Secretary of State should:

- **Reiterate America's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Article V.** In light of recent U.S. government announcements, some in Europe may worry that the U.S. is retrenching and moving away from Europe. Secretary Pompeo should carry with him a continued U.S. commitment to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability Europe is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO. The Secretary of State should reaffirm that U.S. force posture changes do not mean a lessening of U.S. interest in Europe's security.
- **Work with like-minded allies to prevent the completion of NSII.** NSII is a political project, opposed by the majority of U.S. allies in Europe, which would greatly undermine European, and thus, transatlantic, security. Secretary Pompeo should explain the U.S. position clearly and work with like-minded allies to ensure that the remaining sections of pipeline are never completed.
- **Not overlook Turkish Stream.** While NSII may receive significant attention, the Turkish Stream pipelines similarly seek to further entrench Russia's position as Europe's key energy supplier while chocking off revenues that Eastern European countries collect via overland transit fees.

- **Double down on the 3SI and encourage strong regional participation.** At a pivotal moment for the initiative, the U.S. should double down on its bet on the 3SI by announcing matching funds *in addition* to the \$1 billion currently pledged. Furthermore, Secretary Pompeo should encourage 3SI participants, including Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, which have not contributed to the Three Seas Investment Fund, to do so as a key component of transatlantic economic recovery.
- **Counter China influence in Europe.** Secretary Pompeo should encourage allies to remain vigilant about Chinese investments, which come with significant strings attached, and to be wary of Chinese efforts to influence the political debate within the region through threats as well as propaganda instruments, such as Confucius Institutes.
- **Continue to raise U.S. concerns about China's role in 5G.** China is an adversarial power that should not be allowed to use its government-controlled companies to gain a significant foothold in the burgeoning 5G wireless networks of the U.S. or allied countries. Such a presence would be a clear national security threat that could decisively compromise telecommunications and data infrastructure—including the communications integrity of the military and intelligence community. During his trip, Secretary Pompeo should encourage allies to follow the lead of the U.S. and U.K. in eschewing Chinese technology in building out their next-generation telecommunications infrastructure.
- **Work closely with European allies to keep the Western Balkans on a Western trajectory.** The U.S. should work closely with its European allies to keep the Western Balkans out of China's or Russia's sphere of influence. Allies like Austria have historical ties to the region as well as significant economic interests as top investors. The U.S. and its European allies have a mutual interest in seeing that the Western Balkans remain secure and outside the orbit of nefarious outside actors. Secretary Pompeo should continue working with allies to magnify the impact of U.S. policies in the Western Balkans, helping the region to remain stable and oriented toward the West.

Conclusion

Secretary Pompeo's visit to Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovenia is a high-profile opportunity for the U.S. to reaffirm its commitment to Europe, while building on the renewed ties the Administration has forged with Central Europe to advance U.S. interests on key policy issues. Some of the strongest proponents for strengthened ties with the U.S. as a bulwark against Chinese and Russian influence in Europe reside in the nations on Secretary Pompeo's itinerary. He should use the opportunity to shape a road map for continued cooperation on crucial issues facing the transatlantic community.

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Endnotes

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